



Embracing climate, warm or cold

Structures designed to withstand hurricanes and earthquakes can nevertheless look good

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John Hix spent much of his childhood doing repairs at his father's hardware store in the small town of Dysart, Iowa. So it was only natural that when it came time to enroll in university, he sought out the only liberal arts course being offered at Iowa State University: architecture.

"I enjoyed it immediately," recalls Mr. Hix, who went on to teach architecture in the United States and Europe and has become a leading authority on climate design and energy conservation. "It was [about] designing and seeing things built. It wasn't like work and it never has been. Most architects would say that their work really isn't work. It's kind of a way of life."

Today, the 65-year-old architect and his wife, Neeva Gayle Hix, split their time between their home/studio in Tottenham and their hotel in Vieques, Puerto Rico. The couple first visited the island in the mid-1980s and were so taken they bought some land and began to build houses on it.

The project developed into Hix Island House, 13 loft apartments in three buildings set into five lush tropical hectares. With private terraces, outdoor showers and no phones, television or air conditioning, the hotel's Web site claims it is "a retreat amidst rustic Zen-like architectural elegance."

"When you look at a particular site where you're building a building, you try to find all the climatic forces [as well as] the economic and structural forces that you want to use," Mr. Hix says.

"Climate design means all these buildings [at Hix Island House] have large openings towards the trade winds to capture the breeze," he says. "This keeps insects away but also makes the environment cool and pleasant in a rather warm environment."

Mr. Hix's design philosophy is based on making buildings fit with nature.

Accounting for such natural forces as topography, sun, breeze and rain has many environmental benefits, he says, including conserving commercial energy, reducing maintenance and repairs, and minimizing the use of chemicals. For example, Mr. Hix's houses collect rainwater that is later heated by the sun and returned to the garden. He also incorporates solar power whenever possible, such as when he moved his office from downtown Toronto 25 years ago to an "experimental passive solar house" in Tottenham that cost just \$64 to heat in its first year.

Mr. Hix also subscribes to Wabi-Sabi, a term derived from the Japanese tea ceremony that implies an ineffable beauty that transcends mere appearances. The hotel, for instance, is built of block and reinforced concrete surfaced with plaster so it withstands hurricanes, earthquakes and fires. The unglazed windows put guests at one with nature.

"These are all modern buildings but they don't have the refinement of white modern -- white

walls and everything being perfect," Mr. Hix says. "In this case, the esthetic is much more rustic. When you get a crack in a wall or some paint starts to wear away, it actually gets better looking."

Mr. Hix has been an advocate of climate design since graduating from Iowa State. Following post-graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania, he returned to Iowa and worked there briefly before taking on academic posts at North Carolina State University and later in Norway and at Cambridge University in England, where he taught a course on how to run a house using only the energy found on the site.

In the early 1970s, Mr. Hix was drawn to Toronto for its "mix of European civility and American drive" and opened an architectural firm focusing on energy conservation and solar power.

His course at the University of Toronto called Climate and Architecture proved quite popular, he says, since the Arab oil embargo of the time made energy conservation a real-world concern. Around the same time, he built Alpha House, his Tottenham solar-powered home and studio.

Mr. Hix says much of his residential work is in rural areas because there are more lots available for new construction and because he has "an affinity to nature and natural things." Still, he has done quite a few major renovations in Toronto and even the occasional new house. Whatever he's designing, he says he tries to get a feel for the people who will live in the building.

"I really listen to them and what their needs are, what their lifestyle is like, and ... what their dreams are about," Mr. Hix says. "I pick up on certain things clients say and try to emphasize that a great deal. It gives me some direction. The worst client you could have is the one that says 'Do me a house,' without any direction. It's absolutely horrible to try to do that."

Based on his client's responses, Mr. Hix then works to combine spaces with a view to creating an open look and feel. "I don't think I've ever done a separate dining room because that's not modern lifestyle. How many servants do we have?" For Canadian climates, he favours glass, always trying to orient windows to the south, and wood.

Toronto homeowner Ron Beasley admits he was surprised when he and his wife first interviewed Mr. Hix as a potential architect for their dream home. While the couple had a clear idea physically of what they wanted in a home -- lots of light, open spaces and a rooftop terrace -- they were "intrigued" when Mr. Hix began asking questions.

"He came back with a design totally unlike anything we would have physically thought we wanted but it exactly met our needs," Mr. Beasley recalls.

"He came out with something that is unique, modern and minimalist but with warmth, which it would have lacked if it had been up to us because we like things to be quite stark. [He did it] through the use of natural Canadian materials like maple and limestone," Mr. Beasley says.

"We might have built something that was Californian in Toronto but he designed something that is perfectly in keeping with a northern climate and using local materials. [It] answers a lot of our needs for a sense of being in a Mediterranean kind of space."

Architect James Campbell of Rockside Campbell Design Company Inc. in Duntroon, Ont., says Hix Island House is particularly unique, even though it's practically all concrete.

"Rather than working on a superficial material basis," says Mr. Campbell, who apprenticed with Mr. Hix and then worked alongside him in Toronto and Tottenham in the early 1990s, "John is really dealing with the bones of what makes architecture. A huge element of that is climate. It's really the subtleties of light and the feeling of breezes, and all these things are what create the experience as opposed saying, 'Oh, we're going to capture some sun here to heat the building.' It's about using the forces of nature to make the building resonate."

These days, Mr. Hix spends most of his working energy in the United States and in the

Caribbean, though he acknowledges he'd love to add to his long list of work in Canada.

As for urban centres, Mr. Hix would like to see more elements of Parisian style with linear, walk-up buildings and windows that actually open.

"We've become extremely vulnerable -- all somebody has to do is cut the power source and the whole urban fabric doesn't work," Mr. Hix says.

"When you design with climate you take a look at the natural forces that are playing and you design your architecture in such a way that you have windows oriented to the south or, in the Caribbean, openings for the breezes so you don't have to be encumbered by commercial energy... You can reduce your dependency dramatically."

Profile of John Hix.

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